

Society of the Year

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Remarkable novel of tenderness, wit

PARTY OF THE YEAR.

By John Crosby. Stein and Day.
239pp. \$10.95.

By John C. Hampsey

Cassidy is an ex-CIA agent, an ex-professor of medieval literature, an ex-husband, and over 50. Everything about him seems worn, even his prudishness and 19th century style of love. Yet he is vibrant and truly lovable, a hero of strengths and weaknesses, heart and mind.

John Crosby's new novel, "Party of the Year," is neat, tight, and written with experience. It is Crosby's fifth novel since his turn from TV critic to writer 10 years ago, and it clearly shows advancement from the previous four works. The prose is witty and lean, and appears to have been written with great care or great revision.

In both style and content "Party of the Year" treads a fine path between eccentricity and mediocrity, delivering a narrative at once credible and imaginative, precise and ingenious. Unlike many of the big sellers Crosby does not rely upon gimmickry or gross stimulation to convince the reader of his contemporary vision, but rather, accomplishes a rare tenderness and intimacy, not often achieved, even in a "longer" novel. The tenderness and wit are remarkable because they come in a gothic comedy of excitement and suspense.

The Principessa di Castiglione is also a bit worn, a remnant from two divorces, and the wealthy widow of an Italian Prince who was kidnaped, ransomed, and murdered by Italian Red Wind terrorists. The Principessa has moved from Rome to New York City to protect her 12-year-old daughter the Countessa Lucia from similar destruction. The beautiful and lustful mother, and the innocent and difficult daughter, have taken up residence in the Windletop Apartments on the fashionable East Side.

It is here that the novel begins, with Horatio Cassidy taking up his commission as both bodyguard and tutor to the fragile Lucia. The fact that the Windletop is virtually impregnable, "the safest building in New York,"

some of the world's richest and most decadent people, only complicates matters. The terror begins when the Principessa decides to have the party of the year and invite 225 beautiful and eccentric people from all over the world.

Cassidy's endeavor to guard and instruct a stubborn 12-year-old is a new experience for him, and through his experience the reader comes to know and love a man of compassionate heart and strong mind. He gives her everything he knows; from the history of ideas, to kung-foo, to marksmanship in the park. The mature method of this tutelage enables him to succeed where other tutors abruptly failed. He is the first tutor to be more interested in Lucia rather than her seductive mother.

It is the other servants who live with the Principessa that give Cassidy trouble, along with the 22 terrorists subtly allowed into New York, by none other than the CIA. The terrorists also come for the flamboyant party, only as uninvited guests.

The mention of wealthy aristocracy, decadence, lust, terrorists, CIA, kidnapping, a great party, may suggest a series of stereotypical incidents within the plot. But the marvel of Crosby's novel is in the intelligence and ingenuity with which the trite becomes the exceptional. The plot is formed by its prescribed incidents yet given spontaneity through the picaresque Cassidy. From this sensitive combination, of the contrived with the unexpected, the reader feels the "real" and the fantastic unfolding, without too much of either. The legend of the Castigliones offers life and something greater than life. It is this kind of fiction that even the well educated reader needs. A fiction not terribly philosophical with serious underpinnings that challenge the intelligence.

John Crosby is a smooth writer of spare and efficient prose. He is also somewhat of a dramatist, since the scenes build in intensity and are artfully juxtaposed. His protagonist appears very much like an early Renaissance man on a 20th century stage. When the skinny but proud Cassidy tutors on this subject one can't help but see Cassidy himself, a different

actor in every scene—"thinking of Renaissance man as complete in that he was artist, thinker, philosopher, lover, swordsman, diplomat, architect, . . . Cassidy was prowling back and forth, hands behind his back—his Austrian archduke act."

There is that sigh of relief we breathe when realizing a new kind of hero in this worn world, believably good yet with weaknesses we love. This is Cassidy; a graceful man of body and soul, a warrior, a childless father, and a teacher.

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